

Violent video games prove their own source of worry on the tube

WASHINGTON - Don't like what you see on TV? Pick your poison.

One kind of poison is the unwelcome stuff that's sent through the airwaves (or public rights-of-way, thanks to cable) with offensive or objectionable content that you, the viewer, never asked for in the first place.

Another kind of poison is the offensive and objectionable material that's part and parcel of many top-selling video games. The horror here is of a different sort, since someone in the household had to have actually acquired the video game somehow for it to be shown on the TV screen.

"You can't fast-forward through a video game," said Cheryl K. Olson, the former teen issues columnist for Parents magazine and the co-author - with her husband, one-time Parents magazine "Ask the Expert" columnist Lawrence Kutner - of a new book, "Grand Theft Childhood: The Surprising Truth About Violent Video Games and What Parents Can Do."

Ms. Olson was the principal investigator of the first federally funded large-scale research project to look at the effects of electronic games on teenagers and preteens. The survey included 1,200 middle-schoolers in South Carolina and Pennsylvania and 500 of their parents, plus focus groups of 42 middle-schoolers and 21 parents.

Among the findings: Children who play games rated "M" (for "mature" - beyond their age range) spend more hours and days per week on video games; are more likely to play with older siblings; are more likely to play games to "get my anger out" or because "I like to compete and win"; are more likely to play with friends than kids who don't play M-rated games; and are more likely to have a game system or computer in their bedroom. Ms. Olson said nearly half of the kids had a game console and almost a third had a computer in their bedroom, with about one in five having both.

One solution is to “keep game consoles in a common area of the house,” Ms. Olson said.

Problems were also detected with the violent content of M-rated games. Boys who played violent M-rated games were more than twice as likely to get into physical fights, to hit or beat up someone, to “damage property for fun,” steal something from a store, report poor school grades or get into trouble with a teacher or principal. They were also three times more likely to report being “threatened or injured with a weapon such as a gun, knife or club.” The odds of boys’ involvement in all of these behaviors increased with each additional M-rated title on their “frequently played” game list.

Although a smaller percentage of girls play M-rated video games, the numbers for them are worse. Girls were four times more likely to be in physical fights; three times more likely to damage property just for fun, to skip classes or school without an excuse, to be suspended from school, or get poor grades; and twice as likely to hit or beat up someone, to get into trouble with a teacher or principal, or to be threatened or injured with a weapon.

Ms. Olson told Catholic News Service in a telephone interview from Boston, where she and Kutner are co-founders and directors of the Harvard Medical School Center for Mental Health and media and psychiatry faculty members at Harvard Medical School, that her first surprise was “how many seventh- and eighth-grade children were plying M-rated video games” – two-thirds of the boys and one-third of the girls.

While there is an allure to M-rated video games, Ms. Olson cautioned parents against giving the games a “forbidden fruit” effect. “If you say ‘you will play that game over my dead body,’ that cuts off the opportunity to talk with your child about your values and your concerns,” she said. “Video games they can certainly play all they want at college (and outside of parental control). If you don’t talk with them about your values, they won’t have anything to go on. They’ll talk to their peers” instead, she said.

“Grand Theft Childhood” was published two weeks before the April 29 release of “Grand Theft Auto IV,” the latest in the popular series of M-rated video games. Ms. Olson said she doesn’t have the Xbox 360 or PlayStation 3 consoles and can’t yet test

the new version herself.

It's true that in past versions of "Grand Theft Auto" "you can light people on fire, you can beat up a prostitute and get your money back," Ms. Olson said. Yet "we think that the main reason that the attraction to 'Grand Theft Auto' is that it's a very open environment," she added.

"Kids said in focus groups you could be a good guy or a bad guy at the same time. In the game you could choose to go on the missions or take over some evil empire, or drive an ambulance. Or you can drive around and listen to the radio. 'Grand Theft Auto Vice City' had a terrific video parody of public radio fundraising."